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Title : SHORT-BEAKED COMMON DOLPHINS (DELPHINUS DELPHIS) IN THE HAURAKI GULF, NEW ZEALAND.

Category : Conservation

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Preferred Format : Either Oral or Poster Presentation

Abstract : Despite its widespread status, little is known about the ecology of the short-beaked common dolphin. This is partially due to the pelagic nature of common dolphins, which often make them inaccessible and generally difficult subjects to study for ecological field research. As part of an ongoing three year study, information regarding the presence and occurrence of short-beaked common dolphins in the Hauraki Gulf, Auckland was recorded. Data were collected during the southern hemisphere seasons of Autumn, Winter and Spring between February and November 2002. Vessel-based surveys (n= 90) aboard two research platforms resulted in a dedicated survey effort of 390 hours. Six species of cetacean were recorded including the Bryde's whale (Balaenoptera edeni) and bottlenose dolphin (Tursiops truncatus). A total of 140 separate encounters were made during this initial field period. The short-beaked common dolphin was the most frequently observed species accounting > for 81.4% (n=114) of recorded sightings. Common dolphin encounters occurred in water depths of 15.6 to 51.1 m but were predominant in water depths of 36 to 45 m (n= 63). This appears to be a relatively shallow water depth for this species, which is usually described as offshore and pelagic in distribution. Moreover, short-beaked common dolphins are not typically sighted in near-shore, enclosed bodies of water such as the Hauraki Gulf. Sea surface temperature for common dolphin encounters ranged between 10.5° (July) to 25.6° (March). Calves were notably present throughout each month of the research period, suggesting that the Hauraki Gulf may be an important breeding and/or nursery area for this species. Group size ranged from 2 to 200+ animals with the highest proportion of groups encountered containing between 20 and 30 animals. Only 19.8% of groups encountered contained more than 50 animals. Again, this could be considered as unusual for an oceanic dolphin species.